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ABSTRACT

This report addresses the issues delineated by the 70th Texas Legislature in directing the Central Education Agency to study the problem of youth suicide. "Causes and Factors Contributing to Youth Suicide" presents data on national suicide rates for 15- to 19-year-olds and deaths by suicide in Texas for children between the ages of 5 and 19. Conditions that place children and adolescents at risk for suicide, and which have been identified consistently through research are listed, as are several warning signs of suicide risk. "Curriculum Study" contains a summary of the staff's findings in this area and is divided into sections on prekindergarten and kindergarten, social studies, science, English language arts, reading, health education, fine arts, art education, music education, theatre arts, vocational home economics education, agricultural sciences, marketing education, and driver education. This part of the report concludes with some general comments related to all disciplines. The final section, "Recommendations," lists and discusses three recommendations that district trustees and administrators will want to consider as they develop programs to prevent youth suicide. (NB)

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ED306478

REPORT ON PREVENTION OF YOUTH SUICIDE

FROM THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY
AUSTIN, TEXAS

CG 021611

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JANUARY 1989

Report on Prevention of Youth Suicide

As Reported By the State Board of Education

Submitted to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, And the Seventy-First Texas Legislature

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Texas Education Agency
1701 North Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701

December 1988

To the Honorable Governor of Texas, Lieutenant Governor, and Seventy-First Legislature:

House Concurrent Resolution 168 directed the Texas Education Agency to examine the problem of youth suicide and the schools' role in suicide prevention. Specifically, the Resolution requested the Agency to conduct two studies:

- a study of the causes and factors contributing to youth suicide
- an examination of selected essential elements for all grade levels in the curriculum to determine the effect these concepts may have on youth suicide

The Resolution specified that the studies include recommendations for training school personnel in suicide prevention.

Report on Prevention of Youth Suicide is submitted in response to HCR 168. As the report indicates, the Texas Education Agency's efforts to assist schools in suicide prevention will continue beyond the preparation of this document.

Respectfully submitted,

Chairman
State Board of Education

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Introduction

In House Concurrent Resolution 168, the 70th Texas Legislature directed the Central Education Agency to address the problem of youth suicide in the following ways:

- study the causes and factors contributing to youth suicide
- study selected concepts in the required essential elements of the curriculum to determine the effect these concepts may have on youth suicide
- make recommendations for the training of school personnel to help them recognize factors that contribute to youth suicide
- report the Agency's findings to the 71st Legislature

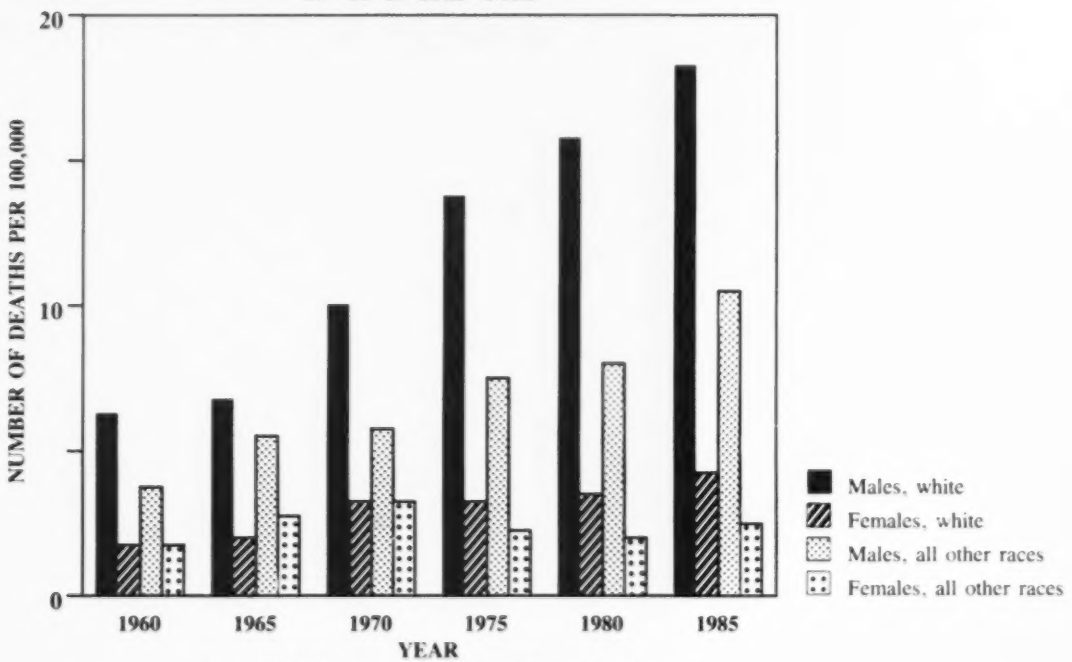
Texas Education Agency staff members, aided by school district personnel with special expertise in the field of youth suicide, undertook the study and reported their findings to the State Board of Education. This report addresses the issues delineated by the Legislature.

Causes and Factors Contributing To Youth Suicide

Youth suicide is increasing at an alarming rate. Since 1950, the suicide rate among youth in the United States has increased by 136 percent. The effects of suicide upon those who are left are, as described by one parent, "as a stake through the heart." Suicide is second only to accidents as the leading cause of death among young people. National incidence figures indicate that more than 5,200 youth, ages 15 to 24, kill themselves each year, with at least 500,000 suicide attempts made annually (National Center for Health Statistics, 1986). The rate of suicide in the 15-24 age group is increasing more rapidly than at any other age (Lloyd, Armour, and Smith, 1987). Of particular concern to educators in secondary schools is the tremendous increase in adolescent suicide. One out of every seven adolescents responding to the National Adolescent Student Health Survey reported having attempted suicide, according to results published in 1988. The U.S. Department of Education reports a 178 percent increase in the rate of suicide completions among 15- to 19-year-olds between 1960 and 1985. The report, based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services statistics, is detailed in the chart that follows.

Suicide occurs among youth from all social classes and racial categories, although whites suffer the highest rate. The threat of suicide exists among all categories of students, those receiving regular school services and those receiving special services, including the gifted and talented. Among students selected to be in the prestigious *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, 31 percent reported they had considered suicide; four percent actually had attempted suicide. Although more females than males attempt suicide, the rate of suicide completions for young males is much higher. Males tend to use violent, aggressive methods of self-destruction such as shooting or hanging, which are more likely to be lethal than the less violent methods preferred by females such as overdosing on drugs (Smith, 1986).

NATIONAL SUICIDE RATE
15- to 19-Year-Olds

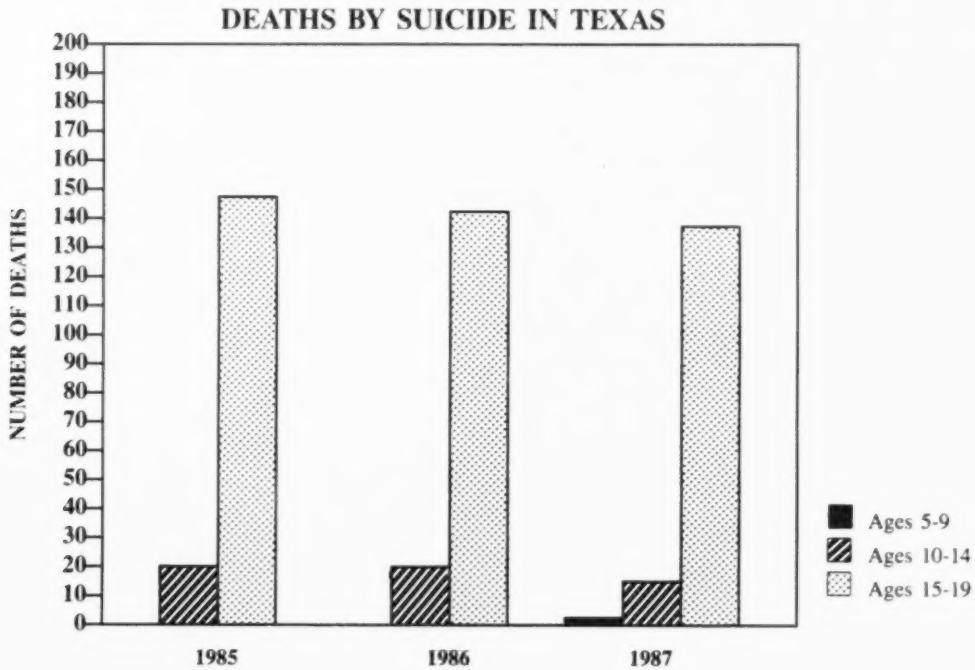


Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Suicide does not occur only among emotionally disturbed or psychiatrically involved youth; it also occurs among young persons who show no signs of mental illness. Experts indicate that any kind of adolescent with any kind of problem can become suicidal (Toolan, 1980). Suicidal feelings usually are accompanied by depression, and both depression and suicidal feelings are treatable. Early recognition of suicidal signs and appropriate intervention, therefore, are critical.

The suicide rates in Texas are higher than the national average. According to Texas Department of Health statistics as indicated in the chart that follows, 157 youth killed themselves in 1987; experts consider this figure to be a considerable underestimate of the actual incidence (Harris and Crawford, 1987). Often when a young person takes his or her own life, individuals filing the death report will classify the death as accidental, either in an effort to protect the feelings of the family or because the apparently accidental death is unrecognized as a suicide.

The accompanying chart shows the suicide rate among children and adolescents in Texas between 1985 and 1987. While the number of reported youth suicides declined slightly during this period, the decline is small enough to be attributable to chance. The National Center for Health Statistics indicates a national suicide rate of 8.5 per 100,000 for 15- to 19-year-old adolescents. In Texas in 1985, that rate was 11.1 per 100,000. Among adolescents, white males had the highest suicide rate in Texas—18.6 per 100,000 (Harris and Crawford, 1987).



Source: Texas Department of Health

Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, futility, despair, anger, frustration, abandonment, rejection, and depression have been identified as aspects of experience that may lead to suicide (Hamlin, 1982; Maris, 1985; Ross, 1987; Schneidman, Farberow, and Litman, 1970). Frequently, the suicidal child or adolescent feels friendless and misunderstood. One study found that 90 percent of suicidal adolescents believed that their families did not understand them (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1988). However, there is no simple cause and effect explanation for suicide (Schneidman, 1985). Young people lack the life experience that assists more mature people in putting upsetting experiences into perspective. A young person who is hurting may see no relief from emotional pain and view death as the only escape.

Psychologists have identified developmental and personality difficulties that may form the seeds of suicide in early life and be exacerbated in adolescence. Lack of self-esteem and poor social skills are examples of such problems. Children who fail to develop effective communication skills or the ability to delay gratification will experience increasing difficulties in adolescence. The inability to cope with loss and failure to develop problem-solving skills may result in the use of escape mechanisms, suicide being the ultimate escape.

The following conditions that place children and adolescents at risk for suicide have been identified consistently through research:

- child abuse
- alcohol and other drug problems experienced by self or family members
- family history of suicide or suicide attempts. If a parent has committed suicide, the children remain at a high risk for the rest of their lives.
- suicidal ideation, often related to the threatened, attempted, or completed suicide of a close friend
- depression. Current research indicates that between 50 and 76 percent of suicide attempters feel depressed. Even agitated depression that frequently occurs in acting-out youth can place that youth at risk.
- chronic illness
- family crises such as marital conflict and recent diagnosis of terminal illness in a family member
- unstable home environment
- experience of a traumatic loss, particularly the loss of a relationship
- current stresses such as unwanted pregnancy, trouble with the law, and sexual identity crisis

Young people at risk for suicide usually will exhibit some of the following warning signs:

- prolonged anxiety
- increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- drastic changes in behavior, either becoming more aggressive or more passive
- sleep disturbances
- changes in eating habits
- loss of energy and loss of interest in activities
- inability to concentrate
- pervasive sense of hopelessness and gloom
- withdrawal from parents, peers, or family interactions

- runaway episodes
- statements about being worthless
- a stated wish to die
- giving away valued possessions
- previous suicide attempts (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1985; Hamlin, 1987; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1986; Ross, 1987)

Studies show that adolescents who have made previous suicide attempts are particularly at risk if, compared to their peers, they evidence less success in school, more hostility, more depression, and more long-term stress (Gispert, Davis, Marsh, and Wheeler, 1987).

Reports on suicide research reveal a considerable consensus among professionals that suicidal ideas arise in a variety of youth from a variety of social and racial backgrounds. Possible causes of youth suicide include social problems that are increasing at an alarming rate, problems that include substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, running away, and familial instability. Research also shows, however, that suicide is preventable. Suicidal feelings can be identified and addressed, and depression can be treated. Timely and appropriate intervention should include all facets of the child's or adolescent's life, especially the family, the school, and the community.

Schools have a critical role in reducing the risk of suicide. School personnel can detect suicidal behavior, provide risk screening, notify parents, refer the family to services in the community, and continue to monitor the student after intervention. To provide such services, schools do not necessarily need to institute new programs. By providing staff with suicide-specific information and training, schools can incorporate suicide prevention into programs designed to prevent other self-destructive behaviors such as drug abuse. An effective student assistance program, for example, can be an excellent vehicle for identifying and referring students who are at risk for suicide.

Curriculum Study

House Concurrent Resolution 168 directed the Texas Education Agency to "study for all grade levels the essential elements in the curriculum dealing with problem solving, decision making, emotion, stress management, communication skills, self-esteem, and affective education to determine the effect that these concepts may have on youth suicide." Agency staff members in the Division of General Education undertook the study and identified areas in the curriculum that offer opportunities for teaching life-affirming behaviors. They also noted curriculum areas that require teachers to exhibit special sensitivity to students who may be troubled.

The following is a summary of the staff's findings; the full report is available through the Texas Education Agency.

Prekindergarten and Kindergarten

The essential elements in prekindergarten and kindergarten provide many opportunities for teachers to encourage the development of positive life skills. In communication development, for example, teachers lead students to "use a variety of words to express feelings and ideas." The pre-K and K art curriculum provides opportunities for children to express ideas, thoughts, and feelings through a variety of simple media. Through activities related to these essential elements, children can discover that there are acceptable and healthy ways to express all kinds of feelings. There are also many opportunities in the curriculum for children to learn to seek out teachers, parents, and other trusted adults when they need help. In social studies, where children "discuss ways people can help each other," and through health education, where they "recognize hazards in the environment, and acquire knowledge and skills needed to avoid injury and prevent accidents," children can learn that it is wise to share problems and ask for help for self or others. The essential elements related to social/emotional development encourage the development of healthy attitudes. Teachers convey these attitudes by modeling and by the way they relate to the children.

There are no particularly troubling topics in the prekindergarten and kindergarten curriculum. Instructional leaders should encourage teachers to convey and reinforce healthy attitudes consistently.

Social Studies

The development of the individual as citizen is addressed by three instructional goals through the social studies essential elements:

- acquisition of knowledge
- development of attitudes and values
- development of skills and processes

The essential elements related to attitudes and values provide students opportunities to examine, understand, and act on values such as the dignity and worth of the individual, equal justice under law, and freedom of speech and religion. These values are presented in the curriculum with varying degrees of complexity and depth, according to the developmental levels of learners. Through the social studies curriculum, students have the opportunity to develop skills and processes for the following:

- obtaining, analyzing, and explaining information from various sources
- applying historical and social science facts, concepts, rules, and generalizations

- using participatory skills in a variety of human relationships
- using the processes of reasoning

In working toward the goals of the social studies curriculum, the skillful teacher assists students in developing knowledge, attitudes, and skills that promote healthy perspectives.

The social studies subject matter—drawn from history, geography, economics, political science, psychology, sociology, and anthropology—contains concepts that teachers must be especially careful to present with balanced viewpoints. Problems such as hunger cannot be ignored in honest, accurate presentations. However, teachers must exercise care to balance the negative with the positive and to present problems not in a hopeless light but as challenges to be met. Teachers also can be alert to the student who dwells excessively on negatives. Faculty inservice programs should inform teachers of the avenues available in an individual school for helping troubled students.

Science

The essential elements in science can contribute to the development of healthy perspectives in the following ways:

- decision making and problem solving
- application of science to everyday life
- balance of content and activities provided in essential elements
- emphasis on safety precautions

Science teaches decision making and problem solving through the emphasis on process skills. This approach discourages the simple recitation of information and encourages inquiry, investigation, questioning, and searching for solutions. Science provides a unique way of addressing problem solving by focusing on a systematic approach.

Applying science to everyday life can give students a greater sense of control over their lives. Manipulating variables, factors, and conditions of a scientific experiment is a major part of the scientific method. Students, in dealing with their social and physical problems, needs, and concerns, can manipulate factors and conditions in a way that is conducive to their physical and social well-being. A skillful teacher can help students see such a parallel.

The balance of content and activities in the science essential elements provides teachers the opportunity to use a variety of instructional strategies to stimulate student involvement. Active participation of the individual learner can foster self-esteem, self-worth, confidence, and positive attitudes. Additionally, the team approach provided in laboratory activities promotes the importance of the individual in a group, the responsibilities of each individual, and a sense of connectedness.

A teacher who reflects the importance of safety precautions in laboratory experiments promotes a healthy environment and communicates the value of life and health.

Science instruction of necessity deals with certain problem areas such as pollution of the environment and the plight of endangered species. The essential elements allow discussion of problems to begin early so as not to be overwhelming at any one grade level. Instructional leaders should remind teachers to provide for balance and to be sensitive to students who dwell excessively on problem areas.

English Language Arts

Essential elements in the language arts curriculum promote effective and purposeful communication through speaking, listening, reading, and writing. An effective program built on this curriculum develops critical thinking skills and the ability to communicate thought. It provides students the opportunity to appreciate and respond critically to literature, to the joys and wonders of life as well as to conflicts and problems. Through self-expression, students explore, test, and refine their judgments and values. By giving students the opportunity to confront the complexities of life, the language arts program can encourage students to deal responsibly and truthfully with relevant issues by putting those issues in perspective.

The language arts teacher has a responsibility not to shield students from problems but to help students talk about difficult situations and feelings. Often it is helpful and nonthreatening to examine how characters in literature express feelings and deal with problems. When a selection in literature such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* actually includes suicide, teachers must provide thoughtful direction to discussion.

A language arts teacher has special opportunities to observe that a student may be troubled or disturbed—by the student's choice of reading material, by the student's preoccupation with a particular subject or idea, by comments made in class or in a journal. Administrators should alert language arts teachers to these opportunities and provide guidelines on appropriate ways to refer troubled students to help.

Reading

The reading teacher should follow the guidelines for language arts. Teacher preparation is particularly important; the teacher must be familiar with what students are reading and prepared for a well-rounded approach to the subject matter. Active teacher involvement is the key to a healthy, balanced course of study. At the elementary level, the reading teacher normally teaches other subjects as well and therefore has the opportunity to review the total curriculum. The teacher can make informed decisions about balance and about tempering potentially troubling topics with other materials.

At the secondary level, much of reading instruction is remedial. Since students experiencing academic difficulties may be high risk for additional problems, remedial reading teachers should be particularly sensitive to indicators that a student is troubled and should be prepared to take appropriate action.

Health Education

The purpose of health education as outlined in the essential elements is to foster healthy attitudes and practices. The first essential element, which is part of all required and elective health education, states that instruction should center on "concepts and skills that foster individual personal health and safety." Health instruction, therefore, is not neutral; health educators must present information in a way that encourages students to adopt healthy habits and to avoid unhealthy risks. Discussions that do not foster good health are in conflict with State Board of Education rules. Counterproductive discussions include those that promote a sense of hopelessness, isolation, helplessness, overwhelming pressure, and lack of control of one's own health and life.

Essential elements at each grade level include topics that can promote healthy attitudes and practices. Instructional leaders should assist health teachers in developing strategies and directing discussion consistent with health-affirming objectives.

Fine Arts

Fine arts can provide creative, healthy means of expressing feelings. Working with the creativity of individuals, fine arts teachers have many opportunities to work one-on-one with students. They often get to know students in a particularly personal way and have opportunities to observe students under a variety of circumstances. Students often will confide in their fine arts teachers. This special relationship gives fine arts teachers a special responsibility to be sensitive to students' needs, to provide healthy role models for handling life situations, and to be alert to students who exhibit signs of needing help. Clues to emotional distress often can be found in students' artistic expressions. Fine arts teachers should be included when faculty receive training on how to observe signs of self-destructive behavior and how to make appropriate referrals.

Art Education

The essential elements for art education at the elementary level emphasize experiences with art media. The art teacher, through individualized instruction, can encourage and direct students to express ideas, thoughts, and feelings in their own ways and at their own levels of ability. Each art experience also requires creative problem-solving activities through which students find their own solutions to problems and rely on their originality, inventiveness, and imagination. Through careful direction in activities of this type, students become more independent and self-reliant. As they express ideas with materials, they can become aware of their unique abilities and develop positive feelings about themselves.

In secondary school, the purpose of the art program as outlined in the essential elements is to foster an intellectual and emotional understanding of art. The study of art is two-fold: art as a body of subject matter and art as a way for the student to become personally involved in the creative process of observing, feeling, and doing. Teachers can give special emphasis to each individual's ideas, inspirations, and imagination.

The essential elements do not require art competitions; this exclusion deliberately encourages teachers to emphasize noncompetitive activities. Elementary art students should not compete with other students because competition may sacrifice the creative experience. At the secondary level, however, art students may need to know how their artwork compares with the work of other students. The way competition is approached or handled can make it a learning situation or a factor that can stifle further student interest. An insightful teacher encourages students to show their good work but discourages them from working for a specialization or stylizing too early. Teachers should encourage students to enter competitions commensurate with their concept and skill development.

Music Education

A well-executed music program based on the essential elements reinforces goals of other disciplines and offers additional positive experiences:

- stimulates self expression, imagination, and creative response
- provides an avenue through which one can become aware of self, experience a sense of achievement, and grow in self-esteem
- encourages development of a bond among participants in an ensemble setting

The essential elements provide for performance as a component of instrumental and choral music programs. In addressing performance factors dealing with stage fright and postperformance criticism, teachers can stress that these factors apply to all performers, including novices and professionals. Learning to cope with the pressures of criticism requires adequate preparation and development of the ability routinely to criticize one's own performance.

Competition in musical performance is a predominant activity in most secondary choral and instrumental music programs. The essential elements for music, however, like those for the other fine arts, do not address competition and therefore minimize its importance. The music teacher must exercise care in stressing a healthy approach to competition so that competition is viewed primarily as a means of improving one's skills.

Theatre Arts

The diversity of theatre arts activities outlined in the essential elements provides a way to involve students as active rather than passive learners. Student achievement is possible through the following avenues:

- the spiral continuum of theatre arts objectives
- the combination of individual and group activities
- the alternation between teacher instruction and direction, peer instruction and leadership, and independent study
- the accommodation of different modes of learning through a variety of experiences

With skillful and sensitive leadership, theatre experiences can contribute to healthy adjustments by requiring self-control and self-discipline, fostering personal growth, enhancing self-esteem, teaching social responsibility, requiring introspection, and fostering the development of coping and decision-making skills. Careful selection of plays and other dramatic works to be studied, produced in class, or performed in public will ensure that the materials chosen will complement the objectives of the program.

The essential elements for theatre arts do not require competition. At the secondary level, however, participation in the University Interscholastic League one-act play contest is common. Educators should not allow the competitive aspects of the program to overshadow educational objectives.

Vocational Home Economics Education

Many essential elements in vocational home economics education can be the basis for strategies that promote students' emotional health and confidence. Students, for example, are provided opportunities to relate good health practices to personal well-being and achievement; determine personal strengths and abilities; plan and conduct leadership activities; apply techniques that contribute to positive relationships with family, peers, authority figures, and others; and point out the practices that foster healthy social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and moral development. Insightful teachers can find many opportunities through the home economics curriculum to provide positive and constructive learning experiences.

A number of essential elements in vocational home economics education courses cover topics that are sensitive and potentially painful. Examples are as follows:

- forms, causes, and prevention of child abuse
- preventing and coping with family problems and crises
- responsibilities of human sexuality
- impact of genetics, environment, and mother's health on prenatal development

New curriculum guides for home economics courses note content areas that teachers must present in a sensitive, balanced, and supportive way and provide related suggestions for teachers. The guides stress the point that classroom discussions of problem areas should end with constructive messages. The guides

also advise teachers to talk with their administrators about sensitive subject areas to secure cooperation and support and to devise strategies that conform to community standards. Inservice workshops for home economics teachers should detail these suggestions.

Agricultural Sciences

Through agriculture courses, students have the opportunity to develop various technical skills, the particular skills being dependent on which courses are selected. Additionally, the essential elements common to all agriculture courses call for personal development in such areas as leadership, entrepreneurship, human relations, and personal and business management. Throughout the agriculture courses is the theme of developing confidence and competence through skills building. Agriculture teachers have many opportunities to encourage individual development of students so that each may experience the sense of satisfaction that accompanies improvement or mastery of skills.

Teachers of agricultural sciences, like other vocational teachers, often have opportunities to interact with students beyond the classroom. Teachers who are sensitive to their students discover that troubled or isolated young people may reach out to their teachers in such situations or show more subtle signs of distress. A teacher can provide help by modeling positive coping behaviors, being a concerned listener, encouraging students to support each other, and helping the student obtain whatever assistance is needed.

Marketing Education

The essential elements common to all marketing education courses, like those for the other vocational courses taught by the laboratory or cooperative method, stress personal development. They include development of leadership skills, successful employment skills, entrepreneurship, safe working practices, human relations, personal and business management, and business communication. Teacher strategies based on these essential elements can promote life-affirming attitudes and behaviors.

Teachers who work with students in vocational cooperatives invariably find themselves in guidance and counseling roles. They deal with small numbers of students and supervise the majority of their students' school days, part at school and part on the job. Significant adjustments are required of a student in a vocational cooperative: being a student and worker at the same time, learning a new job, adjusting to the demands of a job and a boss. Vocational cooperative programs also involve career exploration. Beginning to face the realities of making career decisions often is stressful for young people. Also, students' personal problems may carry over to problems on the job. Teachers must be prepared to assist students in working through these stressful situations or in securing help.

Although the essential elements do not mandate youth organizations to accompany vocational programs, federal guidelines make such organizations an integral part of the programs. Dedicated vocational teachers have found the youth organizations to be an excellent means of helping students develop leadership skills, increase occupational skills, and find a sense of belonging.

Driver Education

The essential elements identified for driver education are developed in a positive framework and do not promote negativism. Two units of the curriculum include decision making. One, "The Good Driver," helps promote the understanding that the privilege to drive carries serious responsibility, helps promote the understanding that emotional conditions affect driving performance, and encourages students to iden-

tify the emotional makeup of a good driver. Another unit, "Personal Decisions about Alcohol and the Driving Task," promotes an understanding that the use of alcohol and other drugs causes problems with the driving task; the unit emphasizes the value of remaining drug free. All the recommended films for this topic are of a positive nature.

The effectiveness of "tragedy films" and other scare tactics to promote traffic safety has not been determined. These tactics may be harmful to certain students and are of unknown benefit to others.

General Comments Related to All Disciplines

The required essential elements of instruction imply performance expectations of students. Such expectations, which are properly associated with skill building, always involve a certain amount of stress. Stress need not be unhealthy; however, any time a teacher places students in potentially stressful situations, the teacher must be alert to the student who already is experiencing an undue amount of stress or who places unrealistic expectations upon self. In such situations, the sensitive teacher will modify expectations of the student; help the student modify self-expectations; or if the problem warrants sufficient concern, make an appropriate referral for outside help.

The essential elements in the curriculum areas reviewed above and in other disciplines provide numerous occasions for teachers to promote healthy attitudes and life-affirming behaviors among students. Instructional leaders should encourage and assist teachers in developing objectives, strategies, and classroom climates that contribute to these ends. As they develop plans for suicide prevention, administrators should include teachers of special student populations such as bilingual, migrant, special education, and gifted/talented. To provide assistance for teachers, administrators can look to curriculum directors, mental health professionals in the school and community, and resource persons in the education service centers. *Education for Self-Responsibility*, a series of curriculum guides being developed by the Texas Education Agency, provides additional resources and suggestions for teaching life-affirming attitudes and skills.

In dealing with potentially distressful subjects, teachers can prepare balanced presentations that take disturbing realities into account but do not dwell on negatives. Additionally, teachers' heightened awareness of students who are preoccupied with problems can result in appropriate and timely interventions. In suicide prevention, the key to successful use of the essential elements is teachers who are well prepared to present balanced treatment of subject areas and who are sensitive to both the abilities and special needs of their students.

Recommendations

District trustees and administrators will want to consider the following recommendations as they develop programs to prevent youth suicide:

Develop a written crisis policy and establish procedures to address suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention.

Although the suicide rate in Texas is higher than the national average (11.1 per 100,000 with at least 100 attempts for every completion), most Texas schools do not have either policies or procedures to address suicide or to intervene after a suicide to prevent additional deaths (postvention). This omission is disturbing, as the school is the institution with the closest alliance and contact with children and adolescents. A report from East Texas State University shows that only four of the 356 superintendents who responded to a youth suicide survey indicated their districts had written policies or procedures to address suicide (Harris and Crawford, 1987). A Texas Education Agency survey of school districts through the National Information Systems and Agency staff contacts with school personnel at statewide conventions yielded a list of only 19 Texas school districts known to have suicide prevention policies. Unless a school has experienced a suicide, it appears unlikely that the district will have made prevention, intervention, and postvention plans. Yet the possibility that a school will have a suicide among its students is increasing. Experts have estimated that at least one student in any classroom is seriously contemplating suicide at any given moment (American Association of Suicidology Proceedings, 1988). Furthermore, districts that are unprepared for a suicide are placing themselves at risk for additional deaths as a result of the well-documented contagion effect that occurs after a student suicide (Harris and Crawford, 1987; Ross, 1987).

Crisis policy and procedures that school staff have reviewed and practiced will benefit a school in many emergency situations. When an emergency occurs at school, staff stress is tremendous, particularly when there are no clear procedures to follow. Since over 75 percent of deaths among young people are sudden and violent—due to accidents, suicides, and homicides—the possibility of a crisis occurring at any school is very real. Being prepared to respond in a crisis helps reduce both physical danger and psychological damage to students, teachers, and others present.

Maintain and update a referral directory and work cooperatively with other community agencies.

Schools can play an important role in suicide prevention by identifying students who may be at risk for attempting suicide and referring those students and their families, when appropriate, for treatment services. To be able to provide timely, accurate, and appropriate referral, schools, working with local community agencies, can maintain a directory of referral sources. The directory could be used by counselors, nurses, teachers, and administrative staff to refer students who are identified as at risk.

The issue of youth suicide does not belong to the school district alone. Coordination with community groups can generate support for the school's program and a sharing of responsibility. School personnel should

identify individuals and groups within the community that may be called for assistance in a crisis, for help in assessing the severity of a suicide risk, for counseling and/or treatment of students at risk, and for raising community awareness and support for the school's efforts. School staff should meet with these persons and groups in advance of need to determine what services are available, how to access the services, and other details.

Increased interagency cooperation by state agencies that serve troubled youth can expedite cooperation among agencies at the local level. Because suicide is a problem that needs the concerted and active efforts of all professionals—both inside the school system and in the community—the Texas Education Agency encourages local school districts to work closely with mental health professionals in their communities. Interagency cooperation at the state level will provide leadership to the districts and assist them in developing similar cooperative efforts locally.

On a regular basis, provide inservice training on suicide prevention and intervention for teachers and other staff who have direct contact with students.

Staff training includes such topics as awareness of the problem, risk factors, identification of warning signs, methods of relating to a student who may be at risk, and referral procedures. The training can be provided by persons who are qualified in suicide prevention such as school psychologists or trained counselors, community mental health professionals, or consultants secured by the local district or education service center.

The Texas Education Agency and the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation are planning jointly sponsored suicide prevention training programs to be offered throughout the state. Available on a voluntary basis to targeted school district and mental health personnel, the programs will address the following issues:

- suicide risk factors
- identification of warning signs
- referral procedures
- development of written policies and procedures
- establishment of crisis teams through liaison with local community agencies
- issues of confidentiality
- specific prevention, intervention, and postvention procedures

Additionally, the Agency will distribute to each district and to each regional education service center a packet of materials designed to assist the districts in establishing effective policies and procedures for suicide prevention. The packet will include the following components:

- issues to be addressed in policy development
- guidelines for developing crisis intervention procedures
- suggested topics for staff inservice training

- strategies for involving parents
- other school programs that can help prevent suicide such as student assistance, peer assistance, and dropout prevention programs
- ideas for developing a cooperative community effort
- suggested resources including lists of reading material, program outlines from other states, organizations that offer pertinent educational materials, Texas college and university staff with specialties in suicide, and school districts in Texas reported to have suicide prevention plans, including the names and phone numbers of contact persons in those districts

The causes of youth suicide and recommended prevention strategies are similar to the etiology and prevention approaches identified for other problems faced by many youth: alcohol and other drug problems, sexual abuse, emotional problems. Implementation of recommendations designed to prevent youth suicide will complement efforts to address other problems and, most important, help save lives of Texas youth.

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COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

TITLE VI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; THE MODIFIED COURT ORDER, CIVIL ACTION 5281, FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS, TYLER DIVISION

Reviews of local education agencies pertaining to compliance with Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and with specific requirements of the Modified Court Order, Civil Action No. 5281, Federal District Court, Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division are conducted periodically by staff representatives of the Texas Education Agency. These reviews cover at least the following policies and practices:

(1) acceptance policies on student transfers from other school districts;

(2) operation of school bus routes or runs on a non-segregated basis;

(3) nondiscrimination in extracurricular activities and the use of school facilities;

(4) nondiscriminatory practices in the hiring, assigning, promoting, paying, demoting, reassigning, or dismissing of faculty and staff members who work with children;

(5) enrollment and assignment of students without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;

(6) nondiscriminatory practices relating to the use of a student's first language; and

(7) evidence of published procedures for hearing complaints and grievances.

In addition to conducting reviews, the Texas Education Agency staff representatives check complaints of discrimination made by a citizen or citizens residing in a school district where it is alleged discriminatory practices have occurred or are occurring.

Where a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is found, the findings are reported to the Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education.

If there is a direct violation of the Court Order in Civil Action No. 5281 that cannot be cleared through negotiation, the sanctions required by the Court Order are applied.

TITLE VII, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11246 AND 11375; TITLE IX, 1973 EDUCATION AMENDMENTS; REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AS AMENDED; 1974 AMENDMENTS TO THE WAGE-HOUR LAW EXPANDING THE AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1967; AND VIETNAM ERA VETERANS READJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1972 AS AMENDED IN 1974.

It is the policy of the Texas Education Agency to comply fully with the nondiscrimination provisions of all federal and state laws and regulations by assuring that no person shall be excluded from consideration for recruitment, selection, appointment, training, promotion, retention, or any other personnel action, or be denied any benefits or participation in any programs or activities which it operates on the grounds of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, handicap, age, or veteran status (except where age, sex, or handicap constitute a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to proper and efficient administration). The Texas Education Agency makes positive efforts to employ and advance in employment all protected groups.

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